

VZCZCXYZ0000
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHAH #0499/01 1101037
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 201037Z APR 09
FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2684
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 5105
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2856
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2721
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3349
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3483

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASHGABAT 000499

SIPDIS

SCA/CEN, SCA/PPD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/20/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [TX](#)
SUBJECT: RFE/RL'S TURKMEN SERVICE: "SALTY" INTERNAL
DISPUTES?

Classified By: Charge Richard Miles, reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Post's recent contact with RFE/RL's Turkmen service reveals an alarming dispute related to journalistic integrity within the organization. Post's main point of contact with RFE/RL in Ashgabat believes he is being marginalized for his lack of "salty" reporting, and despite his submission of informative and honest news stories. Post's email exchange with an overseas RFE/RL correspondent confirms his account and reveals a conflict between the Turkmen service's role as either informative medium or biased opposition. This emphasis on "salty" or harshly critical reporting may help form the opinions of both the Turkmen Government and private listeners in Turkmenistan regarding RFE/RL's legitimacy. END SUMMARY

BRIEF BACKGROUND ON POST'S RECENT WORK WITH RFE/RL

12. (SBU) Post's Public Affairs Section has worked the past few months with RFE/RL's principal correspondent in Turkmenistan, Halmyrat Gylychdurdiyev, to encourage balanced news and information that is useful to Turkmen listeners. Gylychdurdiyev has also acknowledged that during the same period he has received occasional instructions from RFE/RL in Prague to create balanced stories, and to reduce personal or negative, editorial comments that appeared in his stories. While always ready to "report the truth" however negative, Gylychdurdiyev has found that the "softer" stance has likely reduced low-level harassment directed against him by Turkmen authorities. He also noted that he occasionally meets listeners who express their admiration for his stories especially because they are more informative or interesting than most RFE/RL stories. Post has also heard anecdotal comments from listeners that they view Gylychdurdiyev's recent reporting as balanced and informative. This trend toward more neutral reporting appears to be the subject of in-fighting in RFE/RL's Turkmen service.

AN UNUSUAL INTERVIEW REQUEST FROM RFE/RL HEADQUARTERS

13. (SBU) On Wednesday, April 15, post's PAO received an unusual email from RFE/RL correspondent, Tahir Mohammed, requesting a phone interview with A/S Richard Boucher who was in country April 15-16. Usually, Post arranges interviews with Halmyrat Gylychdurdiyev. Mohammed's email justified arranging his own interview by phone instead because Gylychdurdiyev sometimes fails to get the "SALTY comments"

which make for a good news item, "you know what I mean." PAO replied to Mohammed's email expressing concern that seeking specifically "SALTY," negative, or insulting comments from official U.S. visitors betrayed a commitment to objective journalism and would appear to defy RFE/RL's intended role as a legitimate and independent news outlet. Not noted in the email reply was also the concern that Mohammed might have been attempting to steal Gylychdurdiyev's interview.

DEFINING "SALTY"

¶4. (SBU) Later the same day, Mohammed sent a reply email, clarifying that by "SALTY" he meant "current news." To be sure there was no cross-cultural misunderstanding, PAO polled local staff on the connotation of "salty comments" in either Turkmen or Russian language. All staff presumed this to mean something negative. In Turkmen this would likely mean something insulting or which has a negative double meaning. In Russian, "salty" comments would clearly have a negative meaning, and perhaps be used to describe an offensive or obscene joke. (When asked if it could possibly mean "current news" all respondents chuckled or shook their heads in disbelief.)

LOCAL CORRESPONDENT GYLYCHDURDIYEV: LACKS "SALT"?

¶5. (C) Post arranged a short interview for A/S Boucher with RFE/RL's Gylychdurdiyev on Thursday, April 16. Following the interview, PAO took the opportunity to discuss with Gylychdurdiyev the email exchange with Mohammed from the previous day. First, PAO expressed concern about Mohammed's interest in obtaining negative interview comments (without using the word "salty"). Gylychdurdiyev explained that he was also concerned by this, noting that his "softer" reporting in recent months was drawing criticism from his

RFE/RL colleagues for not being "salty" enough. PAO noted that this was the same term used by Mohammed, and asked Gylychdurdiyev to define its meaning. Answer: "criticism" or "something negative." Gylychdurdiyev defended his recent work as informative, fair, and still critical when it reflected reality.

MARGINALIZED FOR A LACK OF "SALT"?

¶6. (C) When discussing the apparent attempt by Mohammed to steal away the A/S Boucher interview, Gylychdurdiyev explained that he had the sense he was slowly being "cut out" of his role in the Turkmen service. He noted that recently only one or two of his stories were broadcast each week, compared to four or five in the past. In particular, there were two recent stories, which he personally felt were worthy of airtime that were never aired because they were "not salty enough." One story was about the conversion of free quotas for household utilities into standardized charges based on usage. The story explained the conversion, estimated costs, and interviewed locals who gave honest opinions -- many negative -- about the change. The second story noted that natural gas industry workers were being provided with better uniforms and protective gear than in the past. Gylychdurdiyev had investigated and reported corruption claims that managers in Mary province were selling the gear at the local markets for personal profit instead. Gylychdurdiyev noted that both stories would have been useful to his listeners and did not hold back on any negative, but truthful information. He also explained that many of his recent stories had reported on positive policy initiatives by the President and then examined the quality of the policy's implementation often including shortcomings. According to Gylychdurdiyev, colleagues criticized many of these stories as "not salty enough."

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Post believes that RFE/RL's Turkmen service overall has had a spotty record in the past two years of reporting accurately on sincere reform efforts, and instead, often reported only negative aspects, or in the worst cases, reported unconfirmed or unlikely stories of government abuse.

Such reporting has led to two results: continued distrust by the government and a lack of legitimacy among many Turkmen listeners who doubt the accuracy of the Turkmen service reporting. Therefore, it is encouraging to see Halmyrat Gylychdurdiyev, the principal Turkmen service correspondent in Turkmenistan for the last four plus years, broadening the style of coverage with an eye to informing the Turkmen public. While recognizing that this cable reflects only one

side of an apparent dispute in RFE/RL's Turkmen service, post is concerned about an apparent internal battle that may be belittling credible, independent journalism. The email exchange (noted in para. 5 and 6) seems to support this view.

Gylychdurdiyev's sometimes more balanced reporting may even be making a small but positive impact on the Turkmen Government's impression of RFE/RL, as evidenced by Gylychdurdiyev's claim of reduced trouble with the authorities. Anecdotaly, listeners seem to appreciate Gylychdurdy's reporting as interesting and useful. It would be a shame, if in fact Gylychdurdiyev were marginalized because he focuses on objective reporting instead of "salty" reporting.

MILES